

Putting Americans Back to Work

Despite rosier quarterly profit reports heralding an improving economy, the nation still has unacceptably high unemployment rates. We must work harder to create an environment where workers can get back to work in good-paying jobs that provide benefits and the ability for Americans to prosper. Democrats seek to grow the economy and create prosperity for all Americans.

Job Creation

Congress needs to work together to put Americans back to work in jobs that will allow them to support their families. One proven way to put people to work in good-paying jobs is to invest in our nation's infrastructure. As the senior New Jersey member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, I am fighting for passage of a \$375 billion transportation bill (H.R. 3550), which will provide increased funding for highway and transit programs. At a time when our state transportation resources are stretched to capacity, it is critical



Congressman Menendez joins transportation workers to announce the opening of a new congestion-relieving overpass.

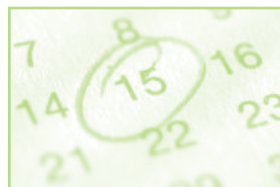
ing seniors with a true prescription drug benefit under Medicare. Our plan creates an immediate economic stimulus and creates one million jobs this year. Now that's what a stimulus plan should do.

Unemployment

It was another difficult year for jobs in the United States. Despite Administration predictions of 200,000 new jobs being created each month, only 1,000 jobs were created during the month of December. At the end of the year, there were 236,000 unemployed people in New Jersey and 8.4 million nationwide. And the unemployment rate across the country stood at 5.7 percent in December. Unfortunately, it was even higher for both Hispanics and African Americans, 6.6 percent and 10.3 percent, respectively. Astoundingly, for the second year in a row, Republican leaders allowed Congress to adjourn last year without extending additional unemployment benefits for workers who have found themselves on the wrong side of this jobless recovery. This is unacceptable. Now that Congress has returned to Washington, I will continue to fight for additional extended benefits and a real economic stimulus package to put New Jerseyans back to work.

We can help in creating economic growth through the passage of a comprehensive transportation bill and a real economic stimulus plan. During this year in Congress, I will be working and fighting to create prosperity for our working families by making significant investments in our nation's people and infrastructure.

Receiving Tax Assistance



By now, you should have received your W-2 form and the other tax reporting documents you will need to file your taxes. Below are several resources that may be helpful as you prepare your tax return.

EITC Overview

You may be eligible for a Federal income tax credit for low-income working individuals and families. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), sometimes called the Earned Income Credit, reduces the amount of Federal tax owed and can result in a refund check. When the EITC exceeds the amount of taxes owed, those who claim and qualify for the credit may be eligible for a tax refund. Income and family size determine the amount of the EITC. Throughout my years in Congress, I have worked hard to ensure that the EITC benefit is available to as many qualifying working families as possible. EITC is a tax benefit that rewards the hard work and dedication put forth by our working families.

To qualify for the credit, both the earned income and the adjusted gross income for 2003 must be less than \$29,666 for a taxpayer with one qualifying child (\$30,666 for married filing jointly), \$33,692 for a taxpayer with more than one qualifying child (\$34,692 for married filing jointly), and \$11,230 for a taxpayer with no qualifying children (\$12,230 for married filing jointly).

IRS Resources:

Website: www.irs.gov

IRS Taxpayer Line: **1-800-829-1040**

Taxpayer Advocate (for difficult problems not resolved through normal IRS channels): **1-877-777-4778**

Refund Status: **1-800-829-4477**

IRS Local Offices:

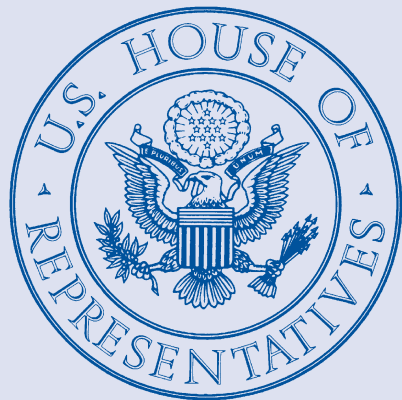
Jersey City **(201) 332-9110**

Newark **(973) 645-6690**

My office is also available to constituents who are having difficulty with the IRS. Although we cannot overrule an IRS decision, my office can often open the lines of communication between the IRS and a constituent.

Congress of the United States
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Official Business



Congressman Bob Menendez

District Offices

911 Bergen Avenue
Jersey City, N.J. 07306
(201) 222-2828

263 Hobart Street
Perth Amboy, N.J. 08861
(732) 324-6212

654 Avenue C
Bayonne, N.J. 07002
(201) 823-2900

3109 Bergenline Avenue
2nd Floor
Union City, N.J. 07087
(201) 558-0800

Washington Office

2238 Rayburn Building
Washington, D.C. 20515
(202) 225-7919

website:
www.menendez.house.gov

Robert Menendez
M.C.
PRSRT STD

Congressman ROBERT MENENDEZ

13th Congressional District ~ New Jersey



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

Dear Friend,

As a life-long resident of this Congressional District, I know first-hand that we are a strong community of hard-working people. When traveling around the district, people talk in terms of basic quality of life issues such as education, job opportunities, and affordable health care. I take those concerns very seriously.

Strong communities mean more than just physical safety. Here in Northern New Jersey, we have ongoing concerns about the availability and security of good-paying jobs, the quality of our public education, the affordability of health care and prescription drugs, and the well-being of our nation's veterans and soldiers. My staff and I are working hard to represent your views in Washington on these and many other important issues to help you meet the daily challenges that you and your family face. To do this effectively, we need to hear from you.

It is a great privilege to represent you in the U.S. Congress, work for your priorities, and tackle the many challenges that remain for New Jersey families and the families of the 13th Congressional District. You may contact me at one of my offices or through my website at www.menendez.house.gov. I hope this newsletter finds you and your family well and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Robert Menendez
Robert Menendez

Report to the People

Investing in Our Future: Educational Excellence for Every Child

A good education is necessary to prepare our children to be successful and productive citizens, and to prepare the nation to compete in the global economy. The strength of our community and the future of our economy depend on the quality of our schools. Therefore, we have a responsibility to help every child meet his or her potential in the classroom.

Head Start

Education starts before school does. Head Start, which provides pre-school classes for children between the ages of three and five, exposes children to a learning environment that prepares them for their formal education. The program helps youngsters succeed in school and grow up to be contributors to our economy and our society. Early preparation is critical for these children, and I vigorously oppose attempts to end the Head Start program as we know it.

No Child Left Behind Act

Two years ago, Congress and the President enacted the “No Child Left Behind Act” (NCLB), which focuses on improving elementary and secondary education by emphasizing achievement, accountability,



Congressman Menendez meets with Clifford the Big Red Dog in launching the "Reach Out and Read Program," a new program to encourage children to read.

and quality in exchange for significantly increased resources. However, the Administration’s last two Budgets have failed to provide the full funding required by this Act by over \$16 billion. Without adequate resources, the real reform that NCLB is meant to create is not possible. That’s why I am working with my colleagues in Congress to keep the promises made to our children.

Higher Education

Tuition and fees for a college education have risen faster than families’ ability to pay. One of the most important things we can do is ensure that every New Jersey child who wants to attend college or vocational school can do so. I’m working in Congress to make higher education more affordable and to support working families through this difficult time.

To better ensure that all college students and their families have the tools and resources to adequately save for, finance, and repay their postsecondary and graduate school expenses, I recently introduced the Higher Education Affordability Resource (HEAR) Act. The HEAR Act would establish enhanced higher educational financing opportunities that include: expanding tuition tax credits, increasing Pell Grants, creating new loan forgiveness programs, and adding more financial safeguards for students who face unusual hardships or come from low-income families.

As the past Chairman of the Democratic Task Force on Education, I know just how important education is to the future strength of our economy and democracy. I will continue to work in Congress to help make a college education more accessible to all of New Jersey’s families.

Affordable, Accessible Health Care

Today our nation faces a health care crisis. Some people are uninsured or underinsured, and many who are fully insured are denied choices and forced into HMOs. Those who are insured today are worried they are one paycheck away from losing their health care. And many people are finding themselves paying three different sets of health care bills — for their parents, their children, and themselves. Combined with rising health care costs, these issues are causing New Jersey families serious economic problems. We need to take steps to make health care more affordable and predictable to protect our citizens’ health and incomes.

Providing a Small Business Tax Credit

Nationally, small businesses account for 99.7 percent of all employers and employ over half of the private workforce. Over 60 percent of uninsured workers are employed by a small business. However, small businesses have an especially difficult time providing health insurance to their workers. That’s why I support providing a tax credit to help small businesses offer health coverage to their employees and their families.

Working for a Patients’ Bill of Rights

Most employers offer health insurance through an HMO or other type of managed care organization. Today, more than 90 percent of working Americans with health insurance obtain it through their

employer, and many don’t have a choice about the type of health insurance that protects their family. We need to make sure that health insurers are held accountable if they deny necessary services or do not deliver high quality health care. This means Americans should have guaranteed access to needed health care specialists; access to a fair, unbiased, and timely appeals process to address health plan problems; assurance that doctors and patients can openly discuss treatment options; and an enforcement mechanism that ensures legal recourse for patients who have been harmed as a result of a health plan’s actions.

Reducing Health Disparities

The existence of health disparities among different races in this nation is undeniable. Although the explanations for the higher rates of disease among minority populations vary, there remains one underlying problem: minority patients are less likely to receive early screening and detection. Minority patients are diagnosed at a later stage and have a smaller chance of survival. We have done a very good job of identifying this problem — now it’s time we do something to solve it. Last year, House Democrats introduced the Healthcare Equality and Accountability Act, legislation which will reduce health disparities in minority communities by increasing health coverage, access to health care, and government funding. This bill will ensure that all Americans, regardless of race, ethnicity, language, or geography, will have access to affordable,



Congressman Menendez addresses nurses and other health professionals about health disparities.

quality health care. I am pleased that my bill, the Patient Navigator, Outreach, and Chronic Disease Prevention Act, is an integral part of this larger proposal. The Patient Navigator legislation addresses the root causes of health disparities in minority and underserved communities: lack of access to health care and, specifically, lack of access to prevention and early detection, as well as language and cultural barriers to care.

As Congress proceeds with its legislative agenda for the remainder of this year, I will remain a tireless advocate and pledge my continued support in making health care more affordable and accessible to all populations.

Keeping Promises to Our Veterans

During these turbulent times, it is important to remember the women and men in the armed forces who gave their lives to protect our freedoms. For centuries, veterans have honorably answered the call to duty. Whether doing so in times of war or peace, they bravely served at great cost and at great risk. Our honor must not only come in words, but also in actions. Just as our soldiers keep their commitment to this country, our grateful nation must keep its commitment to them. Congress cannot turn its back on those who sacrificed so much. I will continue to make sure our veterans’ sacrifices are never forgotten.

Veterans Funding

Unfortunately, perennial underfunding of veterans programs has left our veterans out in the cold: 150,000 veterans are waiting six months for a doctor’s appointment; 14,000 vets have been waiting 15 months or more for their “expedited” disability claims; 560,000 vets nationwide are subject to concurrent receipt (the “disabled veterans tax”); out-of-pocket costs for health care are increasing; and some Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities have been targeted for closure. I oppose any attempt to cut VA funding and I voted against the Republican budget resolution last year that required a \$14.9 billion cut in VA services over the next ten years. Each young man and woman we send to defend our nation and our way of life is a future veteran. We cannot support our troops unless we fully support our veterans.

The underfunding by Congress and the Administration has to stop. Veterans must receive the benefits they’ve earned and were promised. To this end, I have cosponsored H.R. 2318, the Assured Funding for Veterans Health Care Act, which would fully fund veterans health care programs and end the annual pleading for an adequate budget.

Working for Survivors

Survivor benefits must be protected and enhanced. Congress cannot force service members’ survivors to live below the poverty line. Unlike other federal survivor programs, the military Survivor Benefit

Plan (SBP) annuity is reduced by as much as 20 percent when a survivor reaches age 62. In order to correct this injustice, I have cosponsored H.R. 3763, the Military Survivor Benefits Improvement Act. This legislation would phase out the age-62 benefit reduction over ten years, so that survivors can continue to receive the 55 percent their spouses and loved ones set aside for them. Congress must remember its commitment to military survivors by treating them with fairness and providing them with the benefits to which they are entitled — not just until they reach the age of 62.

Concurrent Receipt (Disabled Veterans Tax)

Today, veterans who retire with 20 years of honorable service and have a service-related disability are not permitted to collect both retirement and disability pay concurrently. Last year, Congress passed a law that phases out the ban for disabled veterans wounded in combat, veterans with combat related injuries (including National Guard and Reserve members), and every veteran whose disability is rated 50 percent or greater.

Starting this year, all 20-year military retirees with a Purple Heart or combat-related disability, including National Guardsmen and Reservists, will be eligible for concurrent receipt of both benefits. For other veterans, only those who the VA defines as 50 percent disabled and above will qualify; retirees rated less than 50 percent disabled will continue to be left out of the system. Plus, even those who are eligible for benefits will have to wait as the program is phased-in over 10 years. In the end, it is estimated that only one-third of all disabled veterans will receive full benefits under this program.

To rectify this situation, I have cosponsored H.R. 303, legislation that would permit retired members of the Armed Forces who have a service-connected disability to receive both military retired pay and disability compensation. And I will continue to fight until all of America’s disabled veterans receive 100 percent concurrent receipt funding. Veterans deserve their full retirement and disability pay — they should not be punished because their service to our nation left them disabled.

Modernizing Laws and Creating Jobs in the Financial Services Industry

The financial services industry has been burdened by, in some cases, decades-old regulations that did not take into account the monumental changes occurring in technology and the marketplace. I helped lead the fight both on financial services modernization and on SEC fee reduction, an initiative that reduced the fees investors and firms pay when they buy and sell stocks. I worked with Members from both sides of the aisle in authoring and introducing that bill, and worked with other Democratic leaders to win their backing for that successful legislation, ultimately signed into law by the President.

By leading the fight to bring these and other laws into line with the modern day realities of the financial marketplace, we have been able to bring about new services to consumers, and, most importantly, increase job opportunities in this area. The growth of this industry along the New Jersey side of the Hudson River is a testament to this, and I will continue working to be sure we have modern laws that protect consumers, encourage innovation, and help create jobs.

Protecting Social Security and Medicare

Social Security

For years, Social Security and Medicare have permitted millions of American families to retire with dignity. You may have heard that the President will soon put forward another plan to partially privatize Social Security. The problem is that such a proposal will provide lower benefits, unless the beneficiary is willing to select risky investments and happens to select stocks that perform well. This proposal would also

divert funding from the system, thus endangering current and future beneficiaries. It would be irresponsible to replace the guaranteed benefit with such a gamble, and I will fight against any efforts to privatize Social Security.

Medicare

Prescription drug costs continue to sky-rocket, putting a financial hardship on New Jerseyans, especially the elderly. Democrats strongly support efforts to bring down the rising costs of prescrip-

tion drugs. However, many of us oppose the Medicare Prescription Drug and Modernization Act that was signed into law for the simple reason that it will cost seniors more than they pay now.

Prohibits Negotiating Lower Prices

First, the bill explicitly prohibits the government from negotiating lower drug prices on behalf of the 40 million Medicare beneficiaries, something we already do for our veterans and that we did during the anthrax scare in 2001.

Costs More and Provides Less

The out-of-pocket costs are too high and the bill provides no coverage for expenses between \$2,200 and \$5,000 — a huge gap that will hurt millions of middle class seniors when they need it most. Specifically, it provides a \$275 estimated deductible and a \$35 per month estimated, not guaranteed, minimum premium.

It also contains a large coverage gap for seniors who spend more than \$180 per month on medications, leaving sen-

iors to pay \$4,020 out of the first \$5,100 in prescription drug costs. Low-income seniors would pay more for less by paying higher premiums, while losing additional assistance under Medicaid.

Drops Employer-Sponsored Health Coverage

In addition, four million seniors, including 91,000 retirees in New Jersey, are expected to lose their current employer-sponsored health coverage due to a lack of adequate incentives in

the bill for employers to keep retirees in their plans. A prescription drug plan should be about increasing coverage, not taking it away.

For all these reasons and for several more, I voted against this plan and believe that Congress should repeal and replace this prescription benefit. This year, I will be working hard to ensure that our seniors get a strong prescription drug benefit that is affordable, comprehensive, and guaranteed, just like they need and deserve.